

Karla Stept, who was born in 1918, saw her world end when the Nazis marched into Vienna.



Stept in Austria one year before the Anschluss.

The winter before the Anschluss was a great time. We were happy, we danced the nights away, we made plans for the future. It never occurred to us that, as Jews, something bad could happen to us. Austria had always been an anti-Semitic country, but in a way it had never really touched us in Vienna. We thought that this was the place where we were born, that this was our country. Every time we heard about what was going on with Hitler in Germany, we said, "Oh, that can't stay that way. They'll get rid of that lunatic." And we believed it. That was our tragedy.

A few weeks before the Anschluss, the chancellor of Austria had gone to see Hitler, and when he came back, he spoke on the radio and told us that there would be no changes, that Austria would always be Austria. We believed it, and we were lulled into thinking that everything was going to be just fine. So when we heard on the radio that German troops had crossed the border into Austria and were met by throngs of people welcoming them with flowers, we were very much surprised. There were Nazi signs everywhere. There were large groups of men in brown uniforms and the SS in their black uniforms, wearing their Nazi armbands. They unfurled enormous swastika banners on all of the official buildings.

We found out later that everything was prepared down to the very last detail. Many Austrians, it seems, had wanted to be part of Germany, especially those who had Nazi inclinations. They knew exactly what would happen, but they thought they would be much better off. The Germans came to Austria and trained people who wanted to be Nazis, though the Nazi Party was illegal at that time. All the preparation had to go on without anybody knowing, and I'm sure today that they trained tens of thousands of people.

So Austria converted to Nazism within an hour. It was unbelievable. Then the telephones began to hum. People who lived in sections of the city where they could see what was going on would call and say, "Don't go out. Stay in. You don't know what will happen to you." We were all on the phones to each other. "Is everything all right? What are you doing? What's going on? Look out the window. What's going on on the streets?" Because we weren't sure what was going on.

On Saturday morning, twenty-four hours after the German troops had crossed the border, the brown shirts and the black shirts got to work against the Jewish population of Vienna. They forced Jewish men and women to get down on their knees and scrub the sidewalks free of graffiti, all the while being kicked by the people standing around them. They put detergents and other things into the water, which would eat away at the skin, so these people had to scrub with bleeding hands. And seeing the faces of the bystanders, it was terrible. They were enjoying it. They really enjoyed what was happening to those poor people.